

NSAM file

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18 September 1968
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UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

MEMORANDUM FOR HOLDERS OF USIB-D-46.2/6

SUBJECT : Decontrol and Downgrading of Satellite Photography

REFERENCES : a. USIB-D-46.2/6, 11 September 1968
b. Memorandum to Members of the NSAM 156 Committee, subject: Draft Report on Disarmament Aspects of Satellite Reconnaissance Policy, 9 September 1968
c. USIB-D-41.12/28 (COMOR-D-7/44-5), 23 May 1968, Limited Distribution

1. In executive session at the 13 September USIB meeting with the Deputy Director, National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) in attendance, Admiral Taylor outlined for the Members the principal points in the draft report on Disarmament Aspects of Satellite Reconnaissance Policy (reference b.) which is to be considered by the NSAM 156 Committee. He noted in particular that the draft report in the section dealing with Formal Security Procedures stated that while not essential to the conduct of the disarmament talks, it would be highly desirable to downgrade the fact that the United States conducts reconnaissance satellite operations from its present classification of "TOP SECRET - TALENT-KEYHOLE" to "UNCLASSIFIED". He said that the report further argues that this action would greatly facilitate consultations with our Allies and with Congress; would ease the conduct of the negotiations themselves; would simplify the preparation and dissemination of intelligence analysis; and would be necessary at some stage in presenting the proposed agreement to the press and the public.

2. Although the draft report stated that the information on the results of reconnaissance satellite operations, and information relating to those operations, should continue to be subject to the restrictions of existing classification systems, Admiral Taylor suggested that verification in a disarmament agreement would include the use of satellite photography and that the proposal as outlined in the draft report would make the task of controlling the reconnaissance photography much more difficult.

NRO review(s) completed.

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Excluded from automatic
downgrading and
declassification

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3. Admiral Taylor then suggested that as an alternative the USIB consider approving the proposal submitted by [] in his memorandum to USIB (reference c.) which had been non-concurred in as a result of Secretary McNamara's opinion that the advantages were not clear at that time and that the acceptance of the proposal might erode the advantages which might be gained at some future time by the surfacing of U. S. and Soviet satellite photography. 25X1A

4. Mr. Reber said that the objective of Admiral Taylor's proposal was not clear inasmuch as in the first instance it did not respond to the State Department paper directly and second it offered a proposal bearing on the handling of reconnaissance material which really was not asked for in the State Department paper. On the subject of the State paper, Mr. Reber said he found it difficult to comment because of a lack of clarity; thus on page 5 of the draft, mention is made of the "Soviet acceptance" of the U. S. National Means of Verification. Did this mean that they would agree not to interfere with the operation of a low resolution photo satellite whereas they would be free to interfere with the operation of other reconnaissance devices? Mention is also made of observation satellites without specification as to whether this is confined only to photo reconnaissance or to other sensing satellites. Mr. Reber added that he did not believe any simple statement to the Congress or to the public that the United States was relying on satellites for verification would be accepted without further evidence of the validity of the assertion. Once the subject were addressed, he believed that there would be a great deal of questioning and it would be very difficult to withstand pressures to give out more and more information about satellite reconnaissance. As for the Soviets, they are said in the draft paper to be already knowledgeable of our satellite reconnaissance. Mr. Reber wondered why, then, it was necessary for the U. S. to admit this fact to them. 25X1

5. Admiral Taylor suggested that some of the points identified by Mr. Reber were policy matters for which the NSAM 156 Committee was responsible and that USIB should focus its attention on the handling of reconnaissance information. He said that after reading through the COMOR paper, the guidelines outlined therein seemed logical and he again proposed that USIB consider that report. General Carroll invited attention to that portion of the proposal which states "while not essential it would be highly desirable to downgrade the fact that the U. S. conducts reconnaissance satellite operations from its present classification of 'TOP SECRET - TALENT-KEYHOLE' to 'UNCLASSIFIED' ". He felt that the issue, then,

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related to a highly desirable as distinguished from an essential objective and the pros and cons should be considered in this perspective. He pointed out that it has long been recognized that the Soviets and indeed most of the world are fully knowledgeable of the fact of our satellite reconnaissance efforts but at the same time as a matter of considered policy, the U.S. Government has refrained from officially acknowledging this fact because of concern that the present tacit acceptance of this fact by the USSR might be jeopardized if officially confronted by a U.S. declaration. He felt that all doubts should be resolved in favor of preserving this vital and indispensable intelligence source.

6. General Carroll noted that negotiations with the Soviets are not known for their sweetness and light, and they well might break down in controversy in which event we would have assumed the risk of official acknowledgment without achieving a compensating objective. Therefore, he felt it would be best to avoid a premature official acknowledgment of the fact and wait for reasonable progress in the negotiations at which point if necessary the pros and cons of acknowledging the fact could be considered.

7. General Carroll also expressed concern that public acknowledgment would make it exceedingly difficult and probably impossible over time to protect the product and our degree of success. Aside from leaks to the press, General Carroll observed that at the present time in the absence of official acknowledgment there is an advantageous tacit understanding with Congress generally that no questions on the reconnaissance satellite operations are asked. In addition he visualized problems involving increasing pressures for specific information and photography arising with NATO and our other Allies when official acknowledgment is made. Summing up his position General Carroll said that from a security standpoint he would stand against acceptance of the proposal in the draft report to the NSAM 156 Committee.

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8. [redacted] said that he favored the position outlined in the COMOR memorandum but pointed out that recent decisions made it necessary for USIB to look ahead to the discussion and public debate that will arise on the question of reconnaissance satellites. He suggested that in light of the Presidential decision to go ahead with disarmament negotiations and the identification of verification as a key element in any disarmament agreement, there was a need to be prepared to say more to the Congress and to the public on reconnaissance satellites. He said that

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USIB should start now working on time-phased formulas to safeguard vital information while at the same time preparing statements to support the negotiations. [] stated that while he held no brief for the language of the draft report (reference b.) he thought it was rather unlikely that the U. S. negotiations would get very far before the subject of verification had to be dealt with and for this reason he was prepared to support the proposal in the COMOR paper. Responding to Mr. Helms' request for clarification, [] said he would support the COMOR proposal now but that he expected that we would eventually have to downgrade the fact that the U. S. conducts reconnaissance satellite operations to UNCLASSIFIED.

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9. Admiral Taylor again stated his position as being opposed to downgrading to UNCLASSIFIED but observed that the force of circumstances would probably eventually bring us to it. He said if the USIB expresses opposition to declassification it will be asked for an alternative proposal and for this reason we should review the COMOR paper and be prepared to put our proposals forward.

10. General Carroll said that if a fall-back position was considered desirable he was prepared to consider reducing the classification of the fact that U. S. conducts satellite reconnaissance operations to SECRET, he would have to check with the Secretary of Defense before taking a final position in view of the Secretary's earlier position. As to the COMOR proposal that satellite derived information including attribution as such be downgraded to SECRET he stated that he felt it would be undesirable to effect such a change at this time.

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11. [] noted that DIA had agreed with the proposal in the COMOR paper when last considered and asked what had changed its position.

12. General Carroll answered by noting that the present environment was quite different from 1967 and in the event of an arms limitation agreement the intense public interest would be such that the results of our satellite coverage could not be adequately protected at the very wide-spread SECRET level. This would be particularly true where the photography indicated cause for possible suspicion of non-compliance with the terms of the agreement.

13. Mr. Helms said that he did not consider the Board to be in concrete on any matter and that the USIB could convene to review and change its position at any time in the light of events.

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14. He said his position was that there should be no change in the classification of reconnaissance satellite operations or the information derived from them at this time. Continuing, Mr. Helms said that while he was sympathetic to the disarmament effort, at the same time he felt that we were responsible for the safety of U.S. intelligence interests and if we agree to any downgrading the door will be open. He said the only real secret was the resolution attained in the photography but that any downgrading would move us closer to endangering the security of that fact.

15. While not wanting to change the security classification now he said the USIB could keep this matter under review and at any time change its position as events demand.

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16. The Board then concurred with Mr. Helms' position that no change be made in the classification of reconnaissance satellite operations at this time, and agreed with [] proposal to have COMIREX review USIB-D-41.12/28 (reference c.) in light of the Board's discussion and report back to USIB at a later date.

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✓ Deputy Executive Secretary

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